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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of how and what a school can do to foster student discipline and effort. Personal experiences and observations are offered about the approaches and strategies used in schools and by parents in Taiwan, China to foster students' positive attitudes toward learning and school. This document focuses on the approaches that encourage students to study hard and to behave in a manner which allows teachers to devote most of their time to instructional activities rather than classroom discipline and management. The paper explains that Chinese society emphasizes education as a passport to or an insurance for a successful and happy life, particularly for those individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds. This emphasis has made the Chinese education system extremely competitive. As a result, Chinese children are constantly reminded by parents, teachers, and friends to study hard and to discipline themselves. Because of this, studying hard becomes a norm rather than an exception among school children in Chinese society. Even so, good self discipline and willingness to work hard do not come naturally to all students, and so, schools and parents must create environments that support this demand by making students conform to the social norm. Observations about the educational system and school practices in Taiwan include: (1) keep student life simple, (2) provide examples and guidance, (3) expand teachers' role, (4) keep classroom orderly, (5) test students frequently, and (6) have strong parental support. In addition to the cultural environment, students are constantly couched, herded, and sometimes forced to work hard. (DK)

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Fostering Student Discipline and Effort:

Approaches Used in Chinese Schools

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Fostering Student Discipline and Effort:
Approaches Used in Chinese Schools

In the Learning Gap, Professors Stevenson and Stigler (1992) describe a number of positive aspects of Chinese and Japanese education and parenting strategies. One aspect of particular importance and interest is the Chinese and Japanese students' belief that their efforts will determine academic successes and failures. They believe that effort and perseverance, rather than one's own innate ability, account for most of the differences in school achievement. Thus, Chinese and Japanese students in general are more determined to study hard, more disciplined and motivated, and have better attitudes toward learning and school than their American peers.

This finding further accentuate the results of many studies on the student discipline and effort in the U.S.. Over the years, educators have urged policy-makers to raise education standards by pointing out that American students have a shorter school year and spend less time on homework than students in many other developed countries (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Surveys of parents and school administrators have frequently indicated that the lack of discipline is a serious problem facing the local public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992, p.28). Furthermore, studies of American students and schools have shown that high-achieving students tend to study longer every day and take more advanced courses in high school (Hafner, Ingels, Schneider, & Stevenson, 1990), and that high-achieving schools are more disciplined and orderly than low-achieving schools (Peng, 1982). All these studies have concluded that to increase student learning in this country, American schools would have to improve discipline and increase student effort.

The question then is: How and what can a school do to foster student discipline and effort? Over the years, educators in American schools have applied various strategies, ranging from improving instructional strategies and increasing community and parental involvement to requiring more courses and homework and lengthening the school day and the school year. Unfortunately, while these strategies are helpful, they have not generated the kind of results shown by Chinese and Japanese students as described in the Learning Gap. Something must be missing in American education. What is it? What makes Chinese and Japanese students different? Are there any techniques used in Chinese and Japanese schools that may be applicable to U.S. classrooms and students?

To answer these questions, an in-depth examination of the practices in Chinese and Japanese schools would be helpful. This paper offers some personal experience and observations about the approaches and strategies used in schools and by parents in Taiwan, China to foster students' positive attitudes toward learning and school. Some of these approaches have been mentioned in the Learning Gap, but they are further discussed here to provide a complete context for understanding the Chinese system. The focus of this paper, however, is on the approaches that encourage students to study hard and to behave in a manner which allows teachers to devote most of their time to instructional activities rather than classroom discipline and management.

A most frequently cited reason for disciplined students in China is the societal emphasis on education. Throughout Chinese history, scholastic achievement has been highly valued by families and honored by the general public. A good education is generally regarded as a passport to or an insurance for a successful and happy life, particularly for those individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, from an early age on, children are

constantly coached to study hard and to get good grades in school. Children can surely please their parents by bringing home an outstanding school report.

The emphasis on a good education for children by parents and the society in general has made the Chinese education system extremely competitive over the past few decades. Since high schools and colleges and universities cannot enroll every student who wants to attend, students must compete intensely for excellent high schools and ultimately for the best colleges and universities. Moreover, employment for professional positions in the government and major private companies is also heavily based on academic excellence. Under such a system, children are constantly reminded by parents, teachers, and friends to study hard and to discipline themselves. Studying hard thus becomes a norm rather than an exception among school children in the Chinese society.

However, good self-discipline and the willingness to work hard do not come naturally for every student without deliberate work by schools and families. Without comparisons and guidance, most students will probably not know what "working hard" really means, and how hard is hard enough. Furthermore, no one can really make students study hard by simply telling them to do so unless the surrounding environments are in support of this demand. Thus, what schools and parents do to create such environments that make students conform to the social norm is of particular interest to education practitioners.

The following are a few observations about the educational system and school practices in Taiwan, China. While some are unique to the Chinese society, many others, as stated by Steveson (1992), reveal the effective application of well-known teaching methods that could be easily applied to American schools. In fact, many practices can be readily observed in effective American schools as well.

Keep Student Life Simple. At the system level, the Chinese society keeps students' life simple. First of all, the society agrees that studying is a student's full-time job and studying is children's top priority. Most parents do not expect nor encourage their children to work for pay while in school except for helping chores at home. Thus, unlike their American peers, very few Chinese high school students work for pay after school or on the weekend.

Second, all Chinese students wear uniforms to school and female students are not allowed to wear makeup. Thus, they don't have to worry about their clothing in the morning and they don't need to spend a lot of money on fashions and brand name clothes. Such a practice appears to blur individuality, but it surely keeps students from diverting their attention to things that detract them from studying. The implication is that Chinese students devote more time to learning than their American peers. Moreover, uniforms create a sense of group spirit, honor, and identity, and thus students wearing uniforms outside of school are less likely to misbehave for fearing that they might damage the reputation of their schools.

Third, the majority of senior high schools are single-sex, and even in a co-ed school, male and female students are likely to be separated into different classes. Thus, the school environment is not convenient for male and female students to socialize with each other, and parents generally agree that students at this age are too young to date. Under such an environment, students in general do not have the kind of problems associated with the socialization between male and female students. Instead, students can spend more time on their studies and other school-related group activities.

Provide Examples and Guidance. School curriculum and activities

constantly reinforce the notion of discipline and good effort. The text books for reading classes as well as outside reading materials, for example, are full of examples or success stories of persons with great discipline and perseverance. From the early age on, students read over and over again various writings on the virtue of self-discipline and hard work. In addition, teachers and parents often remind students how to behave properly. For example, students are assembled at least once a week to listen to pep talks given by school authorities, most of which center around appropriate student behavior.

Furthermore, students are carefully guided to conform to the social norms and follow strict discipline rules in school. Every school has a Dean of Students whose responsibility is to ensure that school rules and discipline are followed by students. In addition, there are home-room teachers, school counselors, scout masters in middle schools, and military officers in high schools whose major responsibilities are to discipline students, to provide guidance to students, to watch for disorderly behavior, and to prevent students from getting into trouble. Thus, students are living in a guarded environment like tomato plants growing along stacks. They are herded into one direction: to study and to behave well.

Expand Teachers' Role. Teachers are empowered to play some parenting functions in school. Like Japanese teachers, Chinese teachers frequently teach students the work ethic, proper behavior, and morality that parents are supposed to do at home. By doing so they compensate for what is missed by students with poor parents (Feiler, 1993). Teachers serve not only as instructors but also as coaches, cheerleaders, and parents to some students. Such roles are well reflected in a Chinese saying that being one's teacher for

one day is being one's parent for a life time. This concept has profound implications for conducting instruction in school: students obey teachers as they obey parents, and students live in a constantly reinforced and disciplined environment both in school and at home.

Keep Classroom Orderly. Teachers and school administrators emphasize the importance of orderly learning environments. A variety of practices are used to achieve this goal. At the classroom level, the focus is on student attention and orderly behavior. To begin a class, students are called to rap attention by the class president when their teacher comes into the classroom, signaling the beginning of a serious lesson. By doing so, teachers can quickly move into instructional activities without wasting time waiting for students to settle down.

Students are asked to follow many class routines and rules that guide classroom activities such as collecting and correcting homework, taking attendance, doing team work, and asking assistance from their teacher. These routines and rules are explained and drilled at the beginning each semester. In addition, students will have a seat assignment for the semester and will have certain responsibilities for keeping the classroom clean and neat. "Trouble" students will be assigned to sit away from each other so that they are less likely to start any misbehavior in the classroom.

Students are also given responsibility to discipline themselves. Each class elects a class president, discipline officer, general service officer, and recreation officer to help teachers manage the class. These officers are exemplary students who can help students and govern the class during self-study periods when teachers are absent from the classroom.

Furthermore, each school day is organized into periods of 45 to 50

minutes with recesses between periods. During each recess (as well as the lunch time), students may play on the school ground, socialize, or rest, and thus get "recharged" for a new class. Students' attention levels and enthusiasm for learning are restored or enhanced by frequent recesses.

Test Students Frequently. A common phenomenon observed in Chinese schools is that teachers frequently test their students. Weekly tests, monthly tests, mid-term tests, and a final examination are given each semester. Students take these tests very seriously because the results of these tests determine their grades which are reported to parents and sometimes published in the class or in the school. Under such practices, students are required to study constantly to prepare for tests.

As observed by Vogel (1992), a Harvard University Professor, examinations play an important role in the everyday life of the student. They give young people a sense of focus and mission, and help students develop the habit of working hard, the attitude of obedience, and the belief of getting ahead in society through education.

Have Strong Parental Support. It is difficult for schools to be effective without parental support. Fortunately, most Chinese parents are willing to sacrifice and do everything possible to help their children to get a good education. They place children's school work as the top priority at home, and are willing to pay teachers to provide extra instruction to their children after regular school hours. In affluent families, parents may even hire a private tutor (usually a college student) for their children to review school lessons and to supplement school teaching.

Although parents do not provide much actual assistance in the classroom,

they are very supportive of strong discipline policies and an orderly school environment. A common question Chinese parents ask their children after school is: Did you listen to your teacher carefully? Any misbehavior in school reported to parents will cause a lot of anger at home.

Moreover, teachers maintain a close communication with parents. Some teachers ask parents to sign off the students' daily report so that parents will know what is happening in school and what students are asked to do at home.

In summary, fostering student discipline and effort is a long and hard process. In addition to the cultural environment where education and hard work are highly valued, students are constantly couched, herded, and sometimes forced to work hard. This process begins early when young children enter school, and continue through high school. While some children may still fall through the process and become deviants of the social norm, the great majority of Chinese children are able to gradually make working hard become a habit, a nature, and part of the system accepted by people.

As concluded by Stevenson and Stigler (1992), there are no secret methods but consistent practices of well-known teaching methods in Chinese education, many of which can be easily identified in the effective schools in this country. However, the key to success in Chinese schools is that the society as a whole values education highly and the general public believes discipline and good effort to be effective means to achieve educational excellence.

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